Informed, uninformed and participative consent in social media research

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Abstract
The use of online data is becoming increasingly essential for the generation of insight in today's research environment. This reflects the much wide range of data available online and the key role that social media now plays in interpersonal communication. However, the process of gaining permission to use social media data for research purposes creates a number of significant issues when considering compatibility with professional ethics guidelines. This paper critically explores the application of existing informed consent policies to social media research and compares with the form of consent gained by the social networks themselves, which we label 'uninformed consent'. We argue that, as currently constructed, informed consent carries assumptions about the nature of privacy that are not consistent with the way that consumers behave in an the online environment. On the other hand uninformed consent relies on asymmetric relationships that are unlikely to succeed in an environment based on co-creation of value. The paper highlights the ethical ambiguity created by current approaches for gaining customer consent, and proposes a new conceptual framework based on participative consent that allows for greater alignment between consumer privacy and ethical concerns.

Introduction

Driven by the rise of online social networks, mobile computing and other data-centric technologies, online data gathering has become a significant feature of contemporary market research. However, another equally significant feature is concern over the ethical implications of using of such data within market research activities. A key part of the ethical guidelines which govern market research is the concept of informed consent. Put simply, this is the concept that individuals agree to provide data for market research purposes to professionals *and* demonstrate an understanding of the implications of providing such data. Whilst there are other core elements, such as respondent anonymity, informed consent is the starting point for professional ethics guidelines in market research and it is informed consent that provides the greatest challenges when carrying out market research online. For research into social networks these challenges start with the blanket consent that sites seek from via their users upon sign-up. In this paper we argue that consent in social networks is predicated on a type of uninformed consent that has the effect of disempowering consumers over the information held about them. This is a timely topic as the issue of ethics and social media has been the subject of recent debate within professional research communities (MRS, 2012). The question of commercial use of personal data has also become a significant regulatory issue with drafts of the new European General Data Protection Regulation proposing far greater restrictions on the types data that can be collected from online services without formal consent (Hunton & Williams, 2012).

We begin this paper by considering the role of social media in market research and the concept of informed consent. We discuss the challenges of implementing informed consent policies online where concepts of individual privacy are often contested, and reflect upon the current regulatory environment. We then introduce the concept of 'uninformed consent' as label for an emerging, but deliberate, business policy designed to leverage uncertainty and indifference regarding individual privacy as a mechanism for maximising commercial value from data. Finally, we propose a form of participative consent that takes account of the often contested and contradictory behaviour of contemporary consumers.

Market Research & Social Media

As social media has become embedded within consumers lives there has been increasing interest in how it can be leveraged as a tool for market researchers (e.g. Cooke 2008; Branthwaite & Patterson 2011). Firstly, it fulfils demand amongst market research clients for research into online consumer behaviour. Secondly, unlike many other forms of online communication social networks capture the intricacies of individual's everyday lives (Parent et al. 2011; Hanna et al. 2011). Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, social media platforms' commercial drivers are designed in such a way as to offer, in theory, the potential to access a wide range of data that might not have previously been available to market researchers.

That is not to say that the virtual streets of social networks are paved with gold, and marketers have faced significant challenges where they have assumed online interactions are analogous to physical 'real world' interactions (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). The effectiveness of the strength of community of online networks has also been critiqued with Fournier and Lee (2009) suggesting that, from a marketer's perspective, communities on social network sites are little more than far-flung focus groups. This argument is based on the perception that online interactions are often anonymous and transient, making the relationships formed in online communities weak. Other studies have argued that the weakness of online communication is that they lacks the richness of face-to-face communications (McAlexander et al. 2002; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010).

There is also the question of the extent to which consumers are willing to engage and interact with market researchers online, and to whether 'digital' primary (rather than secondary)

research is possible. Whilst Facebook is keen to create the impression that consumers 'Liking' a brand implies something analogous to a physical world brand preference, the reality is that the barriers to clicking 'Like' are very low. Techniques such as netnography (Kozinets, 2002) have attempted to bridge this divide and apply rich qualitative methods whilst capturing the social aspects of the online world. However, whilst a developing technique, netnography has been criticized for failing to capture the range of offline interactions among members of a community, allowing for dissonance between how respondents may represent themselves online and offline, and more importantly for difficulties of accessing rich data through online interactions (Prior & Miller 2012). Although all of these issues are addressable through triangulation of netnographic data with offline resources (Prior & Miller 2012), this means that online market research has still some way to go to provide a singular source for qualitative research.

Social Media & Informed Consent

A brief history of informed consent

In order to consider the question of research ethics it is first necessary to reflect on the question of *why* informed consent was adopted in market research. Informed consent arose out of the changing status of professionals and the progress of the ethics movement within healthcare after the Second World War (Hansson, 2006). Thus, whilst informed consent may appear to be highly embedded within market research the concept is a relatively recent one. Indeed, the Hippocratic Oath required mastery of the art of deception, with the success of a physician based on their ability to inspire confidence within the patient that they knew what they were doing rather than through skill (Murray, 1990). This perspective was reinforced by the belief that the patient's self-confidence in the physicians abilities was key to the efficacy of the treatment (Southwich, 1988). In a world where most health professionals did more harm than good (Tallis, 2005) this was perhaps a sensible idea, but this approach is unlikely to be transferrable to market research. As the effectiveness of medical professionals improved so too did the idea that patients were autonomous individuals who should be involved, and informed about their treatment.

As ethics became a more significant societal issue, social researchers turned to the medical profession to borrow ethical guidelines and naturally sought as a starting point the concept of 'informed consent' (Hansson, 2006). The medical approach to informed consent was based around an individual patient, which created a number of challenges in applying informed consent to into the typical group level decision making units present in business (Hansson, 2006). However, the concept did find a home in market and social research where ethics guidelines were developed as early as the 1940's (ESOMAR, 2008).

Informed consent can be defined as a "procedure for ensuring that research participants understand what is being done to them, the limits to their participation and awareness of any potential risks they incur." (SRA, 2003:28). This is a relatively straightforward requirement for social researchers to adhere to the ethics codes of professional and academic bodies governing research practices. However, as research issues (such as drug use, sexual orientations and even luxury product consumption), respondents (vulnerable respondents such as children or patients), and research settings (publicly available personal data online) become more and more intricate, so issues governing informed consent become more complicated. Apart from having to comply with legal and regulatory frameworks, social researchers also need to consider issues ranging from competing interests such as the aims of the research, what they consider to be the best interests of research participants and also the best interests of the general well-being of society (Wiles. et al. 2007). There are various practices, although within the frameworks of ethical codes of standard, which differ hugely from each other as employed by different researchers and also in different settings. The issues researchers have

to balance revolve around the amount of information to provide to the respondents, how to provide this information and when and how often to give this information. Another issue in dealing with informed consent is whether some groups, research areas, or research settings need special treatment, for example the treatment of children, vulnerable samples, or in this case online research settings (Wiles et al 2007).

Market Research Regulation & ethics codes

"*I don't want to be alone, I just want to be left alone*." - *Greta Garbo*

The dilemma for market researchers who seek to gather data from social networks, and for individuals who use and provide data to such networks, is aptly captured by the above quote. Social networks provide considerable value to their users, maintaining kinships in a world where traditional social connections based on work, family or religion are weakening (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Yet social networks are also driven by commercial imperatives based around the exploitation of data upon which social value is generated. It is this misalignment between social and commercial goals that is the source of ethical challenges relating to use social networks as a source of data by market researchers. It is true that firms have long collected customer data, but data generated by social networks is both richer and broader in scope, including information about a wide range of personal preferences and interpersonal relationships. The combination of such relationship data with longitudinal gathering of data enables a much more granular form of data analysis; analysis which, thanks to new software tools, is now available to a broad range of research users and not just to statistical experts.

The challenge for market research is two-fold. To stay relevant market researchers need to use the best sources of data available in their research. In any age where marketing is increasingly data-driven, and even the most junior marketing employee often has access to a plethora of easily accessible online analytics and transactional data, researchers cannot ignore online sources of data. However, to stay in business, market researchers need to adopt an approach that is seen as ethical both by consumers (i.e. research participants) and clients. There is the traditional argument for professional ethics codes, that self-regulation is a better scenario than governmental regulation. However, there is also the increasing shift towards concepts around corporate responsibility within organisations, public and private, and the expectation that this will extend to their suppliers (Amaeshi et al., 2008).

The question of consent is perhaps the core component of research ethics in market research. Whilst the specific term 'informed consent' appears only in the MRS code (MRS, 2006) the ESOMAR code around voluntary co-operation contains the same effect. ESOMAR's recently published guidelines on social media research (ESOMAR, 2011) highlight one of the first dilemmas with research on social media: *who grants consent?* If the research 'participants' have already granted consent for their data to be owned by a social network then are they in a position to refuse access for data about themselves that they do not own? There is also the alternative view hinted at in figure 1; even if a research participant has given consent for their data to be used, exploitation of such data for research purposes may be prohibited by the social network.

Code	Context of Consent
ESOMAR (General Code) 2008	"Respondents' co-operation in a market research project is entirely voluntary at all stages. They shall not be misled when being asked for their co-operation."
ESOMAR (Guidelines on Social Media Research) 2011	"If consent has not been obtained (directly or under the ToU) researchers must ensure that they report only depersonalised data from social media sources."

	"Researchers will be subject to the service owners' Terms of Use (ToU). Most ToU have intellectual property rights clauses that explicitly forbid the unauthorised copying of material. Many go further to bar all forms of social media data collection."
MRS (Code of Conduct) 2006	"Researchers shall ensure that participation in their activities is based on voluntary informed consent."

Figure 1. Consent in professional ethics codes

The answer to both these issues lies, to an extent, in the legal and regulatory framework that surrounds the collection of data. Market research already operates within the context of individual national data protection legislation. It could also be argued that data protection legislation has benefitted market research, through providing a form of validation for the use of ethics codes and consent based data collection. When it comes to online research this regulatory focus comes to the fore due to the ubiquity of data, as is highlighted by the ESOMAR social media guidelines (2011):

> "Everything we see, hear or experience online is dependent on the underlying coding of the medium and the way data is copied, transmitted to and rendered on the devices we use to experience it. In the midst of all that data, there are strings of data that relate to identifiable living natural people – personal data, and that is where the problems begin."

The 'problems' lie with the key ethical battleground of the definition of what is personal data, or personally identifiable information (PII). Both regulators and industry agree on the need for personal data to be kept private. Even the advertising industry, perhaps the profession with the greatest commercial interest in the exploitation of online behavioural data, acknowledges this reality:

> "Good data is becoming key to good advertising by enabling the effective targeting of ads to those consumers most likely to be interested in a product or service. The emergence of new technologies means the role of data and its impact on privacy is become increasingly important to consumers, the industry and policy-makers." (Advertising Association, 2012)

However, the challenge with online data collection – particularly that surrounding social media – is defining what exactly is meant by private information. Specifically, the debate surrounds the use of cookies and IP addresses. Cookies have been addressed through existing EU data legislation which, by requiring an opt-in, appears to have had relatively little impact on the use of cookies by consumers (Ashford, 2012). A much more significant challenge is that around IP addresses, which has become the focus of forthcoming European General Data Protection Regulation (Hunton & Williams, 2012). Whilst this legislation is in draft format, and hence likely to change, the key question revolves around whether IP addresses can be considered personal data in the same way that a personal address is. This question has generated considerable debate within the market research community, some arguing that attempts include IP address limitations within professional ethics codes could seriously limit the commercial opportunities of market research (Mareck, 2011).
This is critical, as to process *personal* data EU directives requires unambiguous consent (Altheim, 2011), although even the authors of these directives acknowledge that unambiguous consent is itself ambiguous:

> "The notion of "unambiguous consent" … needs further clarification and more uniform interpretation. It is necessary that operators know what constitutes valid consent, in particular in on-line scenario". (EU Data Protection Working Party, 2011:3)

Our argument here is that to ensure effective self-regulation, professional ethics guidelines must reflect the environment in which they operate and consider changing consumer norms, however contradictory they may be. The privacy paradox, where consumers freely provide private data but then object to its use (Barnes, 2006), creates a number of challenges to existing modes of research.

The first is that much of the actual collection of data via social media is carried out *a priori* of the purpose of the data collection being determined. Even if the data is collected for its pre-determined purpose a wealth of other forms of analysis can be carried out on the data. Unlike in traditional forms of commercial research, where the scope of the research is determined in advance, many of the research questions are developed after data has been collected. Significantly, this changes the focus from data collection to data analysis and raises the question over whether truly informed consent can be gathered when the purpose for which the consent is being gathered is unknown.

The second is that social media data collection is often unintentional, or at least unanticipated. In offline interactions a significant proportion of human activity goes unrecorded or unnoticed, even under conditions of widespread surveillance. However, the nature of online activity means that a 'digital exhaust' is created regardless of whether the data at the time is intended for collection

The third is in the inherently participative and co-creative nature of social media. Informed consent has been criticised as an inherently uni-directional and even patriarchal approach (Hansson, 2006) that fails to take account of the dyadic and collaborative nature of social media, and the way in which value is created online.

Finally, there is the problem over ownership of the data. This creates the issue that individuals are sometimes giving information about other people through their online activity. Thus, if they are being asked for informed consent it applies not just to themselves but to also their friends, family, and acquaintances.

Market research provides a (rare) example of a business discipline in which ethics codes are widely accepted and implemented by the profession. It is therefore understandable that the challenges in reconciling the changing data collection environment with the needs of market researchers are causing tensions between commercial imperatives and previous professional ethical norms. The tension is caused by a fear that existing ethics codes require a level of consent that is unachievable via online research. As Ray Poytner puts it:

> "If market research companies abide by the old ethics, in particular anonymity and informed consent, they will not be able to compete for business in most areas where market research is growing." – (Poynter, 2011)

Uninformed Consent

So far we have specified the process through which consent is gathered in contemporary market research, and the challenges faced by research wishing to implement informed consent in an online environment. We now consider consent from the other perspective, that of the social networks. This is a relevant context because social networks' own contractual relationships with their users, or terms of use (TOU), could legally act as a means of

providing consent for data collection (Altheim, 2011) .

If so, this is an important development as social networks have adopted an alternate consent strategy in response to the previously outlined commercial limitations of informed consent. This form of consent sought by social networks is largely based on meeting the minimum legal requirements for beginning the collection and analysis of data in order to maximise the commercial gain from this data. Whilst, measured by informed consent dogma, this could be seen as an 'unethical' approach to data collection that is driven by more than simply an attempt to commercialise data, but also by an ideology under which privacy is seen as old fashioned or even uncessary.

Approaches to privacy taken by leading social networks are outlined in figure 2. On the one hand they promise that ownership of content remains in the hands of the individuals who posted it. On the other, they grant themselves permission to use the content for a wide range of purposes, purposes which are largely unspecified. There are two key protections offered by all of the main social networking sites; (1) end-users can choose to delete data and prevent it being used for commercial purposes and (2) personally identifying (and non-public) information is removed before sharing with commercial partners.

Site	Consent Policy
Facebook	You own all of the content and information you post on Facebook, and you can control how it is shared through your privacy and application settings. In addition: For content that is covered by intellectual property rights, like photos and videos (IP content), you specifically give us the following permission, subject to your privacy and application settings: you grant us a non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license to use any IP content that you post on or in connection with Facebook (IP License). This IP License ends when you delete your IP content or your account unless your content has been shared with others, and they have not deleted it.
Twitter	Our Services are primarily designed to help you share information with the world. Most of the information you provide us is information you are asking us to make public. This includes not only the messages you Tweet and the metadata provided with Tweets, such as when you Tweeted, but also the lists you create, the people you follow, the Tweets you mark as favorites or Retweet, and many other bits of information that result from your use of the Services. Our default is almost always to make the information you provide public for as long as you do not delete it from Twitter, but we generally give you settings to make the information more private if you want. Your public information is broadly and instantly disseminated.
LinkedIn	You own the information you provide LinkedIn under this Agreement, and may request its deletion at any time, unless you have shared information or content with others and they have not deleted it, or it was copied or stored by other users. Additionally, you grant LinkedIn a nonexclusive, irrevocable, worldwide, perpetual, unlimited, assignable, sublicenseable, fully paid up and royalty-free right to us to copy, prepare derivative works of, improve, distribute, publish, remove, retain, add, process, analyze, use and commercialize, in any way now known or in the future discovered, any information you provide, directly or indirectly to LinkedIn, including, but not limited to, any user generated content, ideas, concepts, techniques or data to the services, you submit to LinkedIn, without any further consent, notice and/or compensation to you or to any third parties.
Pinterest	Pinterest allows you to post content, including photos, comments, and other materials. Anything that you post or otherwise make available on our Products is referred to as "User Content." You retain all rights in, and are solely responsible for, the User Content you post to Pinterest. You grant Pinterest and its users a non-exclusive, royalty-free, transferable, sublicensable, worldwide license to use, store, display, reproduce, re-pin, modify, create derivative works, perform, and distribute your User Content on Pinterest solely for the purposes of operating, developing, providing, and using the Pinterest Products. Nothing in these Terms shall restrict other legal rights Pinterest may have to User Content, for example under other licenses. We reserve the right to remove or modify User Content for any reason, including User Content that we believe violates these Terms or our policies.

Figure 2. Consent policies for leading social networks

Such privacy policies appear commercially fair, but they also encourage a culture of information sharing and impose a penalty for failing to share information. In this case the penalty is a reduction of value derived from the social graph and less utility from the site overall. We apply the label of 'uninformed' because whilst these policies provide a form of legal protection for the consumer they do not inform the user of the service of the full range of potential uses. This is evidence in consumer responses to information use.

> "Every time Zuckerberg Inc. pushes the boundaries on sharing user information with outside entities, outrage ensues… Despite our dissatisfaction with Facebook's privacy flaws, it has become an indelible part of the culture." (Baker, 2012)

Some examples highlight the role that such uninformed consent may have in disempowering consumers. Facebook acquired 'Glancee' a service that runs in the background and uses mobile phone GPS signals to help identify individuals, and strangers, with similar interests who are in the same area (Baker, 2012). Facebook has also attempted to prevent individuals from using fake personal identities or pseudonyms in order to protect the quality of its advertising data, a policy that has already breached data protection laws in Germany (Osborne, 2013). The question therefore arises of whether there is an alternative approach to consent that takes into account the mechanisms through which value is co-created in contemporary consumer relationships.

Participative Consent

We have argued that existing approaches to respondent consent create considerable issues when implemented to cover online data collection from social networks. At the heart of the problem is the difficulty in applying ethics codes designed for the offline world into an online world. Whilst researchers collecting data on a high street only collect data on those who respond, and agree to answer questions, on the 'virtual' high-street of a social network data is being collected indiscriminately – even on those who do not notice the researcher.

An alternative approach to consent therefore needs to take into account the unique characteristics of digital data sources. The concept of participative consent has been associated with more participative research methodologies such as action research and viewed as a response to the more participatory nature of consumer behaviour (Maklan et al. 2008). Markets and consumer behaviour are increasingly conceptualised and explored through a dominant logic of service where value is co-created and realised as actors interact with each other and suppliers in an ecosystem (Grönroos 2011). As market research moves into these dynamic settings, a new paradigm of research is required to capture the complexity and greater knowledge exchanges grounded in the participation of actors (Tronvoll et al. 2011). Participative consent is conceptualised within this dynamic research paradigm and applied to generating data in online interactions of social network participants.

Firstly, participative consent implies an ongoing process. In an online environment 'informed' consent is highly context and time sensitive and thus consent given at one time may not be appropriate in the future. Participative consent should therefore be seen as an ongoing process whereby individuals can opt-in, and out anytime they wish, in order to control what they share with the researcher. This is a contrast to the 'all or nothing' form of consent used by existing social networks.

Secondly, participative consent requires participation and agreement between members of the network, as social media research is not simply about a relationship between a sample of consumers and a single organisation collecting data. This is important as, by proxy, individuals may be sharing information on friends and others in their online social networks as part of the data collection process.

Thirdly, feedback loops should exist through which those providing the data can provide feedback on the value generated through the commercial exploitation of their data. Whilst this is perhaps a controversial step, if value is maximised through its co-creation, as theory suggests, then will ensure greater long term value from customer data. A limited example of this in action can be seen on the existing feature that enables Facebook users to 'rate' the relevance and quality of advertising. A truly participative form of research consent would enable individuals to give similar feedback on the quality of research findings.

Fourthly, and perhaps the most challenging, is the need to engage individuals to the point that they are willing to inform themselves to make valid decisions about their privacy. Such a goal needs to move beyond the 'privacy paradox' and enable respondents to balance the benefits of taking part in research, and not simply take a 'knee jerk' decision to opt-out of research. Our argument here is that only through engagement with the research process can respondents become effectively participative.

Our goal in this paper is not to simply present a theoretical construct but to suggest a practical mechanism through which effective consent can be gained within social media research. To this end, and considering the characteristics of social media research that we have already discussed, we provide three scenarios where participative consent may be applied and be necessary. These examples are based on a range of techniques through which social media can be used as a research tool. Whilst we seek to identify pragmatic approaches to implementing participative consent we acknowledge that, in making these suggestions, ambiguities are also raised when dealing with the somewhat liminal boundaries that exist between public and private spaces in social media. We identify the three techniques as response based research, observational research and analytics research. In doing so we are *not* seeking to create a new typology of research methods, but rather to identify areas where participative consent may be helpfully applied.

Response Based Research

This form of research is most analogous to traditional offline research design, where respondents are invited to take part in a research study and thus there is a mechanism through which consent can be gained as part of the study. Here, social media is a mechanism for identifying potential respondents. For example, identifying individuals with certain interests or qualifications that can be determined via online content, or through leveraging the behavioural targeting offered by social networks to help identify particular sample populations. Participative consent can be gained through making clear to respondents the basis on which they have been chosen, particularly when it is through a mechanism other than random selection. Given the potential for social media data to be inaccurate this also gives the respondent an opportunity to clarify the accuracy of such sampling assumptions. As identity and a contact mechanism has been established via this approach it is therefore possible to enable ongoing interaction with respondents and gain further consent where data may be used in ways beyond those originally anticipated. Similarly, where access to a social graph is required as part of research the respondent acts as a gateway to the social graph providing a clear mechanism through which further consent can be required. By keeping in touch with respondents, and explaining the ways in which participative consent has been sought so we hope that the fourth point we raise above, that of engagement, can be reached.

Observational Research

Observational research involves analysis of information generated by respondents themselves. This has applications through both the application of netnography (Kozinets, 2002) and the increasing use of sentiment analysis to generate customer insight from social media. The question arises whether, from an ethical standpoint, this information can considered to be in the public domain and thus analogous to carrying out research in a public space. Clearly, for many social media platforms, some or all of the information provided by their users is

publically available. However, the question remains as to whether those providing this content online are aware that it is public, or intend for it to be public. For example, the ability for content to be spread across members of a social graph on networks such as Facebook can create a public, or semi-public, audience for material where the original intention was for it to remain private. Overall, this means that researchers should proceed with some caution and consider the specific context of the data they are collecting Where there is ambiguity over whether the data is in a space that could be consider public, then clarification should be sought from the respondent before research commences. Even here there is a further complication in that whilst a respondent may give permission to access their private data, this data may – in fact – be an accumulation of data from other individuals within the social graph. In these cases we would suggest that research consent has not been given and any information collected should be 'cleansed' of data from those whom consent has not been gathered. Whilst this may limit the value of the social data collected, it is a necessary step to achieve participative consent. As with netnography, to achieve ethical consent the researcher must avoid being an online 'voyeur' for information that may appear public but is not in the public domain.

Analytics Research

Research based upon analytics data uses autonomously generated data about respondents based on their online activity, rather than content they have specifically generated themselves. The extent of analytics data available depends on the social network, and whilst such data is oriented to advertising purposes, it can also have a high level of utility for market research (Nunan & Knox, 2011). The challenge in participant response here is that respondents are potentially unaware not only that research is being undertaken, but that the data on them was being gathered in the first place. In turn, this creates a number of practical problems in determining appropriate consent.

In many situations organisations offer analytics data that is aggregated as a means of preserving anonymity. However, care must be taken as aggregation may not always preserve anonymity. For example, whilst variables may be aggregated, and anonymised, at an individual level these may still allow identification when multiple variables are combined if the variables themselves are too narrowly defined, for example through personal interests on Facebook (Acquisti et al., 2011). An example of analytics research where appropriate aggregation is offered is Google Analytics where a clear policy preventing the access or storage of personally identifying information (PII) is in place. This includes preventing access where PII could *potentially* be made available, for example by limiting geographic targeting to towns rather than at a more granular level. Where access to PII may be possible then ongoing consent should be sought. Given the nature of analytics data, it is quite possible that the control of the original identity will not be in the hands of the market research client, but rather the social network. This creates the very real issue that, within the constraints of current social networks, lack of data ownership or access by researchers may prevent the form of participative consent outlined here to be gained in these circumstances. However, even here there remains an opportunity for individuals to be better informed, via terms of use, as to the ways in which data collected on them could be used for both commercial and research purposes. Whilst this information may be necessarily non-specific it can also serve to better engage individuals in issues around privacy thus meeting one of the requirements of participative consent.

Conclusion

Managing the shift to online data collection provides both opportunities and threats for market researchers. Existing ethics guidelines have limitations in an environment of internet dominated data collection. Yet, abandoning or watering down ethical guidelines could alienate research respondents and may promote a more restricted regulatory regime creating

an even more restricted environment for market research. The history of the relationship between commerce and regulators is often through a rear view mirror, with regulators taking years or even decades to bring in effective legislation. However, much of the potential of social media research can be limited by only relatively simple change in privacy regulations. For example, by reclassifying IP addresses as personal information. The contribution of this paper is to highlight the benefits of meaningful 'participative consent' within market research. We believe that by protecting against the potential for harm to respondents and fully involving them in the research process the value of social media research, and the quality of insight it produces, will be increased. In doing so we hope this paper can shift the debate towards the best way to deliver such consent in the contemporary market research environment, rather than view consent as a limitation in itself.

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